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THE FOUNDING OF MAIN STREET—IV

BY STANLEY T. WILLIAMS

THE LETTERS OF MATTHEW ARNOLD

“DEAR MR. ARNOLD,” wrote the great P. T. Barnum, as Matthew Arnold neared Bridgeport, “you are a celebrity, I am a notoriety; we ought to get together.” The American magazines of 1883 and 1884 congratulated themselves that this visitor was really a celebrity, a celebrity who had studied our institutions, and who was likely to make more than insular comments on our *mores*. Had not Mr. Arnold already written an essay on America, and had he not spoken with sympathy regarding our liberalism? More than any other Victorian who had examined the founding of Main Street he possessed a vision of the hopes and aims of society as a whole. True, his learning was not deep, but his culture was broad and of the best. He was neither a statesman nor a politician, but he knew a good deal about democracy, and other social experiments. Moreover, although one might question the working value of Arnold’s phrase doctrines of “culture” and “sweetness and light”, no one could deny the fine quality of their idealism. In fact one periodical said outright that he would be a better judge of America than other recent visitors, William Black, Herbert Spencer, John Freeman, or even Professor Geikie and Mr. Bagley Potter.

It is a little discouraging, then, to read in *The Nineteenth Century* of 1888 what the celebrity said of this infant democracy. The “remnant”, “numbers,” “*Gemeinheit*”—how these cool tributes to our social organization reverberated through the rocks and rills, the woods and templed hills, of America; or rather through the editorial offices of every magazine and newspaper! The celebrity was hard on our society. Of course he found some things to praise: He pointed out—Mrs. Trollope to the contrary on this point—that there was real equality in America; and

in American women, though their voices were by no means gentle and low, he discovered the charm of naturalness. About other things—Arnold was never silent concerning our social evolution—one may read for himself what Arnold thought of our democracy. At this moment we are interested rather in what Arnold thought of American life and manners; with what eyes he beheld the persons and things which irritated Mrs. Trollope, which disgusted Dickens, and which amused Thackeray. What, for example, did the celebrity think of the notoriety?

It is all in the *Letters*. Mrs. Trollope had been gone from America more than forty-five years; Thackeray more than twenty-five; Dickens about fifteen. What had happened in the interval to Main Street? Arnold marched down it, a critical judge. We were seen, naked and unashamed, by the elegant Jeremiah, the priest of the kid-glove persuasion, the Professor of Greek, the man who believed in the well-known preference of the Almighty for University men. He suffered. There can be no doubt of that. I fancy that, had he been here in Mrs. Trollope's day, he would not have endured it. All that was better in our culture since the visits of these others was offset by the quality of this mind that surveyed us in the 'eighties. Commodus visiting the barbarians of Germany could not have felt more distant than Matthew Arnold contemplating the American Philistine. Arnold was kind towards us, kind as Plato might have been when he watched his artisans hammering out a suit of armor; kind, but equally remote. He failed—let this be our comfort—to comprehend the sweat and toil of those who are founding a new civilization. "Quebec," he wrote Walter Arnold, "is the most interesting thing by much that I have seen on this continent, and I think I would sooner be a poor priest in Quebec than a rich hog-merchant in Chicago."

It is monotonous to notice that Matthew Arnold came to America to make money. Neither his inability to make a speech, nor even Frank Harris, could keep him from the mint of a public lecture tour in the United States. His first adventure here was with an old friend of his, the young reporter, Leo Adolescents, as he had christened him in *Friendship's Garland*. In a letter to his sister he describes the busyness of this person. He had not

yet landed. "We were lying," he writes, "off Staten Island, a beautiful *orné* landscape with spires, villas, hills, and woods. 'Just like Richmond,' I said to someone by me, 'and not a single Mohican running about.' This precious speech," he concludes, "has got into the newspapers here." Chiefly because of the newspapers he writes: "The blaring publicity of this place is beyond all that I had any idea of." Curiously enough, American newspapers were able to sting Arnold as those of England could not. The earlier letters which describe the attacks of London papers are models of good humor. And when Frederick Harrison burlesques him in an imaginary dialogue called *Culture* he "laughs till he cries". But *The Chicago Tribune* was his master; it lacerated him. This paper, he says, "is sent me to-day with a violent attack upon me for lecturing for 'filthy lucre', and the people catch the cries of their newspapers wonderfully." On January 21 he writes his daughter from Chicago: "A Detroit newspaper compared me, as I stooped now and then to look at my manuscript on a music stool, to 'an elderly bird pecking at grapes on a trellis'—that," he says, "is the style of the thing." Some comments were more pleasing. At Newport he found in a newspaper the following: "The Baptist Union recommend all good Christians to give at least two hours to reading their Bible for every hour they give to hearing Matthew Arnold. This shows," the wise editor concludes, "that in the judgment of the Baptist Union Matthew Arnold's doctrine is very nearly twice as powerful as that of the Bible!"

Another *contretemps* with American newspapers is recorded in part in the *Letters*, but is revised and enlarged in Arnold's essay on *Civilization in the United States*, which appeared in *The Nineteenth Century* in April, 1888:

You must have lived amongst their newspapers to know what they are. If I relate some of my own experiences, these will give a clear enough notion of what the newspapers over there are, and one remembers more definitely what has happened to oneself. Soon after arriving in Boston, I opened a Boston newspaper and came upon a column headed: "Tickings." By *tickings* we are to understand news conveyed through the tickings of the telegraph. The first "ticking" was: "Matthew Arnold is sixty-two years old"—an age, I must just say in passing, which I had not then reached. The second "ticking" was: "Wales says, Mary is a darling;" the meaning being, that the Prince of

Wales expressed great admiration for Miss Mary Anderson. This was at Boston, the American Athens. . . .

I proceeded to Chicago. An evening paper was given me soon after I arrived; I opened it, and found under a large type heading, "*We have seen him arrive*," the following picture of myself: "He has harsh features, supercilious manners, parts his hair down the middle, wears a single eyeglass and ill-fitting clothes." Notwithstanding this rather unfavorable introduction I was most kindly and hospitably received at Chicago. It happened that I had a letter for Medill, an elderly gentleman of Scotch descent, the editor of the chief newspaper in these parts, *The Chicago Tribune*. I called on him, and we conversed amicably together. Some time afterwards, when I had gone back to England, a New York paper published a criticism of Chicago and its people, purporting to have been contributed by me to *The Pall Mall Gazette* over here. It was a poor hoax, and many people were taken in and were excusably angry, Mr. Medill of *The Chicago Tribune* among the number. A friend telegraphed to me to know if I had written the criticism. I, of course, instantly telegraphed back that I had not written a syllable of it. Then a Chicago newspaper is sent to me; and what I have the pleasure of reading, as the result of my contradiction, is this: "Arnold denies; Mr. Medill [my old friend] refuses to accept Arnold's disclaimer; says Arnold is a cur."

It is difficult to surpass this, except in the heading of *The Chicago Tribune* in huge letters: "*Matthew Has Whiskers*."

On the whole, Arnold's letters give a pleasant picture of our virtues, but one cannot help feeling that he thought these virtues second-rate. In Hartford he stayed with "a nice old couple called Clark". (Here he whispers that "Hartford is the richest town in New England, and Mr. Clark the richest merchant in it.") Arnold seems to be quite sensible of the distinction of wealth.) What he found in the Clark family he thought typical of an American virtue. "The whole family have," he wrote, "compared with our middle class at home, that buoyancy, enjoyment, and freedom from constraint which are everywhere in America, and which confirmed me in all I have said about the way the aristocratic class acts as an incubus upon our middle class at home. The universal enjoyment and good nature are what strike one here."

Indeed, pleasant adventures are manifold. Arnold is thrilled by a spin behind "two American trotters". He is pleased with Henry Ward Beecher. General Grant, although he attends the lectures and cannot "hear the British lion roar", goes out of his way to serve Arnold. Oliver Wendell Holmes is interested, and

"dear old Whittier" meets him at luncheon. He likes Dartmouth and finds the five hundred young ladies of Wellesley College "charming". He dines with the president of Amherst, "the president (who is a widower), his three daughters, and a favourite student, who perhaps is going to marry one of the daughters?" Of the fare at these entertainments there are endless, itemized chronicles. Arnold is learning to like this morning porridge of "split oat groats", which the Americans call oat-meal. He is delighted with the elms of Concord and with "Queeny" Emerson, who, he concedes, has "manners of high distinction". Most of all he likes Virginia which, he notes, "was colonized not by the Puritans, but by English gentry." In fact in Virginia "the cloth is drawn after dinner in the old English fashion".

Yet, after all was said for these things, they could not, Arnold thought, dye out the true American mood, the mood of common-placeness, of *Gemeinheit*. Even our hearty good nature he found more than counterbalanced by the attendant lack of reserve:

Some of the best English qualities are clean gone; the love of quiet and dislike of a crowd is gone out of the American entirely. They said Washington had it; . . . but I have seen no American yet, except Norton at Cambridge, who does not seem to desire constant publicity and to be on the go all the day long. It is very fatiguing. I thank God it only confirms me in the desire to "hide my life" as the Greek philosopher recommended, as much as possible.

At the Capitol Mrs. Trollope and Dickens are brought vividly to mind by "the dirt, untidiness, and spitting." He whirls about the country at reduced rates with tickets bearing the inscription, *The Matthew Arnold Troupe*. Finally, at St. Louis, the truth is borne in upon him of the assertion of an American bishop, that "Denver was not ripe for Mr. Arnold".

The *Letters* as a means of studying Arnold's opinions of our culture should be supplemented by passages from the essay in *The Nineteenth Century*. All our Philistinism had its focus, Arnold thought, in our defective sense of beauty:

I asked a German portrait-painter, whom I found painting and prospering in America, how he liked the country? "How *can* an artist like it?" was his answer. The American artist lives chiefly in Europe; all Americans of cultivation and wealth visit Europe more and more constantly. The mere

nomenclature of the country acts upon a cultivated person like the incessant pricking of pins. What people in whom the sense for beauty and fitness was quick could have invented, or could tolerate, the hideous names ending in *ville*, the Briggsvilles, Higginsvilles, Jacksonvilles, rife from Maine to Florida; the jumble of unnatural and inappropriate names everywhere? On the line from Albany to Buffalo you have, in one part, half the names in the classical dictionary to designate the stations; it is said that the folly is due to a surveyor who, when the country was laid out, happened to possess a classical dictionary.

"The truth," Arnold adds, after declaring that Washington was but an English officer, and that Lincoln lacked distinction, "is that everything is against distinction in American, and against the sense of elevation to be gained through admiring and respecting it. The glorification of 'the average man', who is quite a religion with the statesmen and publicists there, is against it. . . . Above all," he says, and we smile, "the newspapers are against it."

So they saw us, these Victorians. They saw the beginnings and the growth of Main Street. They spoke frankly of us, and they made us angry. No one enjoys comments from strangers on table-manners in his home. This is the real difficulty: that their criticism made us angry instead of thoughtful; that we would not criticize ourselves. Arnold saw this weakness more clearly than Mrs. Trollope, Dickens, or Thackeray. "The worst of it is," he said, "that all this tall talk and self-glorification meets with hardly any rebuke over there." This was true then. It was very nearly true a score of years ago. It is not true now. In fiction, in poetry, in every form of writing, the protests are louder and more persistent. Our dissatisfaction with ourselves must preface something. Mr. Chesterton says, I believe, that it is but another sign of our commercialism. Many of us believe that it is a sign of something quite different—the dawn of a new intellectual life.

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